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## On Maura Stanton's Poems

Gregory Orr

In this brief essay, I am attempting to characterize and explore a world that consists of only three poems. Yet it is possible to test its dimensions and explore some of its implications, because the world created by these three poems is consistent and powerful. It is a violent and desperate world, some of whose aspects I will try to discuss in these fragments.

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In "Crabs," the very first line thrusts us into the midst of a crucial social situation, the speaker's wedding feast. By the third line, it is no longer simply a social situation and we are approaching the poem's real subject: a psychological exploration of the speaker, the bride, in this specific context. Perhaps the important thing to remember in this poem is that once we have passed the ninth word of the poem, we have left the external world and have entered into the subjective world of the bride's fears, thoughts and fantasies. It is in the context of these thoughts and fantasies that we come to understand her relationship to both the in-law ladies and the husband. First, the in-laws, whom she sees as eyeing her and appraising her as though she was a machine/animal for producing children. The crabs of the title are linked to these women who are "bitter with the need for children." The crabs are trapped in the cooking pot, and in their entrapment they turn their claws on each other just as these ladies "root in (her) belly" with their clawlike tongs flashing. In addition, there is a poison membrane the crabs possess and which the bride has eaten at this, her wedding feast. In line 10, a third factor enters the speaker's thoughts: her husband. He is seen as "belonging to these ladies," to the point that it is these women rather than the man himself who ravish her on her wedding night. The man is asleep, of little consequence, and she returns to her struggle with the women. Now she imagines that their persecution involves her own body's decomposition, and her situation begins to parallel the torment of the crabs trapped in the cooking pot. The women preside over it. The simultaneous identification with the women and victimization at their hands is consummated when the bride identifies herself with her great-grandmother in a casket photograph: a full circle of the generations of women united by some strange kinship of unfulfillment, a kinship linked to death. In some sense, the speaker is sacrificed by the women so that she can join them.

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The existential situation from which "The First Child" emerges is that of a young wife's first pregnancy. The physical setting is winter, a landscape con-

sumed by the whiteness of snow and ice, just as the wife is consumed by silence. We learn that it is the child in her womb that "devours [her] speech." In her imagination the child inside her is "a blind fish nervous at its hook." As the child devours her speech, she dreams that she also is "a fish/ beached somewhere on an iceberg." At this point, they share an identity. In line 10, she declares, "this isn't love. My husband/ keeps his hands away, quoting/ statistics." The husband rejects the wife's need for affection, claiming that young wives in their first pregnancy are easily traumatized. Ironically, it seems to be his rejection that inspires her with fantasies of destroying the foetus. Whatever the cause, the wife stands at the loveless center: rejected and "deserted" by her husband, afraid and threatened by the strange, instinctive being inside her. She wants the husband to understand "that this is how frost (cold/lovelessness) comes." She is walled in by fear, and the child is walled in by her own cold body. Both she and the child are doomed to lovelessness, and the husband is himself doomed emotionally in spite of his detachment.

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These poems speak in terms of primary isolation and primary need. The voice is extreme ("desperate" in social terms). The "I" of these poems is self-consciously alienated from life processes (birth, aging, pregnancy, death) by its fears, angers and suspicions. There is an enormous sense of tension: of attraction (need) and repulsion (fear). It is a given of these poems that trust, the primary link of the world of human relationship, is missing.

There are two kinds of tension in these poems. One is the tension manifested in the poem's situation. It consists of the speaker trapped between two "others" (women and husband in "Crabs," foetus and husband in "First Child"). The second kind of tension results because the poems are set off against our clichéd expectations of archetypal events (pregnancy, wedding feast). The poems operate against the backdrop of these cliché expectations, a backdrop that was as readers, regardless of sex, are reluctant to reject. We don't want to give up our more affirmative view of these events, and so we cling to it as Stanton batters us with her view.

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For some reason the notion of ritual comes to my mind in relation to Stanton's poems, perhaps because of the poems' extreme and absolute emotional stances. There is a strong sense of death and of a preoccupation with death in the poems. In traditional cultures, there is an attempt to come to terms with fears of death and of the dead through rituals. In their several ways, these rituals provide relief from fear and also from the alienation that the "fearer" is victim of. In Stanton's poems there is no such relief or release. This brings to mind the "confessional" tone of the poems. Like much of what we regard as confessional poetry, they are rooted in biographical detail and in specific social situations. When we use

confession in this context, we aren't referring to the religious ritual of confession. Religious confession is only part of the larger process of confession-repentance-forgiveness. It is a cycle and when the cycle is completed the person who has confessed is freed from the alienation and isolation of individual guilt. Again there is release and relief. But in "confessional poetry" as we have come to know it, there is a breaking of this chain, so that confession only means acknowledgment or listing of that which was hidden away. There seems to be no faith on the speaker's part that forgiveness is possible. Perhaps in the extremity of its isolation, the individual ego has come to believe that there is nothing outside itself which is capable of forgiving, nothing but other isolated and alienated egos. Perhaps this lack of faith/trust in the possibility of forgiveness or acceptance accounts for the anger, rage and despair that characterize so much "confessional" poetry.

And why confess if there is no forgiveness? This brings me to another ritual alternative, that of the scapegoat. The speaker in these poems acts as a kind of psychic scapegoat for the reader. She assumes the burden of guilt about socially forbidden or unacceptable feelings which we all possess. She "damns" herself in her speech (the poems) and agrees to be driven into the desert loaded down with the collective sins of the tribe. By a further extension, in this kind of poetry, the poem itself functions as the poet's scapegoat—providing the one possibility of release and relief.

If I seem to put an enormous burden on the speaker in the poems, it must be remembered that Stanton does so also: we are always inside the speaker's mind, and much of the poem's concern is expressed through the fantasies and thoughts of an enclosed self. For example, it is not that it is difficult to judge the actions of the meddling, embittered aunts and in-laws in "Crabs," not that it is hard to be sympathetic to the speaker. But the speaker draws the reader relentlessly into her own world of subjective response to the meddling ladies, an inner world that is violent and extreme and does not seek any detachment, nor allow the reader any. We are inside the speaker's thoughts for better or worse. A balanced picture is not sought, nor is it possible in the terms of these poems.

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These poems are poems of alienation from life processes, poems of extreme isolation. They contain pleas to the human world ("This is not love. My husband/ keeps his hands away . . .") that collapse on themselves. They are painful. Camus' *Stranger* tells us what it is like to be alienated and not know it, but these poems tell us what it is like to be alienated and be excruciatingly aware of it and of how it feels.

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The poem "In Ignorant Cadence" is the most lyrical of the three, the most detached from a socially recognizable setting. This very detachment allows the self/the speaker to confront her existential situation most clearly. It is the purest

in its violence, because it is self-violence. In some sense, the raping king is extraneous to the Philomela myth, a First Cause or Unmoved Mover, necessary but whose nature and motives are outside the speaker's world, impossible to fathom or comprehend. What concerns Stanton is Philomela's pain, suffering and silence, and the need to free oneself from this silence.

In Robert Lowell's introduction to Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, he says, "though lines get repeated and sometimes the plot is lost, language never dies in her mouth." It is this very fear, that language could "die in one's mouth," that haunts Stanton's poems. In "The First Child," the opening statement is "I grow dumb." The foetus "devours (her) speech" and "nibbles (her) brain." But the threat to the speaker in "In Ignorant Cadence" is now internal in a different sense. The poem speaks about a distance that is internal—no longer between the speaker and others, but between parts of the speaker's own self: between her brain and her heart, between thought and speech. She identifies with Philomela, someone whose impulse to express her horrible story was so great it overcame the loss of her tongue. "Tongue" is a key word, that part of the physical body that holds the greatest hope and threat for the speaker. Her tongue is "alive in (her) mouth like a slippery fish" and also "a hopeless slab of muscle." It evades her impulse to speech, either with its own instinctive life (fish) or its own deadweight reluctance.

Hope does not seem to exist in the social world, the world of human relations, at least not in terms of these poems. In fact, the one poem that offers hope plays off against a human situation (the Philomela myth) which is, if anything, more grim and violent than the other two in its picture of the human condition and human relations. Yet if the pleas to the human world collapse, the pleas to a world of poetry that is expression of pain do not collapse, but "wobble on the edge of song." It is "song," the woven tapestry of speech, which offers some possibility of release.

### Maura Stanton's Response

Nothing is more difficult for me than talking. When I write, I feel as if I am stirring up the chemicals in my brain, trying to force some kind of combustion—the poem, the "tapestry" which says what I can't. When I can disguise myself in an imaginary situation, such as in "Crabs" and "The First Child," or re-create myself in an "impersonal" work of art, I can speak without the self-consciousness that ordinarily plagues me. The Philomela myth has always been an important metaphor for my own work: she was turned into the almost-voiceless swallow, not the nightingale as is commonly believed.

It is a poem's obligation not to be boring. Yet a poem cannot be ludicrously melodramatic. Very few poems avoid these traps. Melodrama generally occurs in a poem's dramatic situation, but is often magnified by tone and word choice. It can be overcome by restraint and attention to detail and language. Boredom is

a more widespread condition, not caused by subject matter—for nothing is intrinsically boring—but by flabby language, abstraction, details that are general rather than specific (i.e., “fruit” instead of “oranges”), prose that masquerades in line breaks, and—quite simply—meaninglessness. Boring poems are as likely to make *no* statement as they are to be *mere* statement.

A poem should be a complex statement about a complex personality. A poet cannot be an amateur. He is a craftsman who works, not in stone or oils, but in words. This craftsmanship is what I am most conscious of in regard to my own work, for it gives me the tools for dredging up the odd things at the bottom of my brain.

Complexity is a subtle matter: I recognize it, in Yeats, Donne, Dickinson, Dugan and a very few others, but I don't know how it is achieved (except that it takes an immense amount of hard work). If I have a blind goal, it is that. It means that I will probably never be satisfied with anything I ever write (beyond those few hours of euphoria immediately after finishing a poem), but it also means (hopefully) that I will never be in the unfortunate position of imitating myself.

I know what I have to do next, and am beginning. I must work my way through the limitations of the specific dramatic situation and *persona* (“My women with insane attitudes”) into something else—what, I'm not quite sure. Yet I can't abandon my style, which I recognize as sometimes baroque and often not liked in an era of spare and rather quiet poems. I must simply make it do more for me.